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In Pursuit of National Interest: Change and Continuity in Malaysia's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East

Ruhanas Harun

ruhanas_harun2003@yahoo.com

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

Abstrak

Secara tradisinya, dasar luar Malaysia tertumpu kepada rantau Asia Tenggara dan negara-negara sahabat di Barat. Keadaan ini menyebabkan Timur Tengah tidak diletak sebagai kawasan keutamaan dalam dasar luar negara walaupun terdapat hubungan sejarah, sosial dan keagamaan yang telah lama terjalin. Namun selepas 1980-an, Malaysia mula memberi perhatian kepada mempertingkatkan kerjasama dengan Timur Tengah dalam kerangka memperkasa hubungan dengan dunia Islam. Hubungan dua hala Malaysia dengan negara rantau tersebut adalah rapat, namun ia tidak begitu terserlah jika dibandingkan dengan hubungan Malaysia dengan negara Asia Timur dan Barat. Kertas ini membincangkan dasar luar Malaysia kontemporari terhadap Timur Tengah, faktor-faktor yang membentuk dasar tersebut serta isu dan cabaran dalam hubungan dengan negara rantau tersebut. Adalah diujahkan bahawa objektif Malaysia di Timur Tengah berkait rapat dengan mempertahankan kepentingan nasional yang mampu dicapai dengan mengukuhkan hubungan politik, ekonomi dan sosial dengan rantau tersebut. Sebagai sebuah negara kecil, Malaysia tidak mempunyai pengaruh untuk menentukan keadaan di rantau itu. Namun, masih terdapat mekanisme dan kerangka kerjasama serta jalinan sosial dan keagamaan yang boleh membantu negara untuk mencapai kepentingan nasional. Kertas ini juga menyatakan walaupun terdapat rasional untuk meneruskan dasar luar yang ada terhadap Timur Tengah, Malaysia perlu melihat kembali kejayaan dan kegagalan dasar tersebut. Juga ia perlu memberi perhatian kepada memperluaskan hubungan selain daripada bidang tradisional bagi memanfaatkan peluang ekonomi yang ada di rantau Timur Tengah.

Kata kunci : *Dasar luar, Kerjasama, Kepentingan nasional.*

Abstract

Malaysia's foreign policy has traditionally been focussed on Southeast Asia and its friends in the West. As such, the Middle East was not a priority area in its foreign policy despite the long established historical, social and religious connections that the country had with the region. It was not until the 1980s that Malaysia began to develop closer cooperation with the Middle East within the framework of strengthening relations with the Islamic world. Bilateral relations remained close with several countries of the region, although they lacked the visibility and force in comparison with Malaysia's relations with East Asian countries and the West. This paper examines Malaysia's contemporary foreign policy towards the Middle East, the factors shaping it, the issues and challenges in managing its relations with the region. It argues that Malaysia's objectives in the Middle East are tied to securing its national interests that can be achieved by enhancing political, economic and social ties with the countries of the region. As a small country, Malaysia does not have the influence to affect events in the region. However, there are mechanisms and frameworks as well as the social and religious links that can help promote the country's national interests. The paper further argues that while there are reasons to continue with the current policy towards the Middle East, Malaysia needs to take stock of the successes and failures of its relations with the countries of the region, and to explore some areas outside those traditional ones so as to take advantage of the economic opportunities that the region may provide.

Key words: *Foreign policy, Cooperation, National interest.*

Introduction

Malaysia has a long history of relations with the Middle East embracing the political, social, religious and economic dimensions. In recent years, their relationship has grown steadily, especially in economic and social fields. Malaysia's political stability, economic progress and its image as a progressive Muslim country have attracted the attention of many countries in the Middle East to reinforce their relations with Malaysia. However, in spite of the growing interactions and cooperation in various fields, Malaysia-Middle East relations seem to lack the visibility, vibrancy and the force that characterised Malaysia's relations with its traditional friends and major trading partners. There is also question as to whether the country has a well-formulated and focused foreign policy towards the region, one that might be beneficial for Malaysia in various aspects.

In its most basic definition, foreign policy is the policy of a sovereign state in its interactions with other sovereign states. It is a policy that a nation pursues in its dealings with other nations designed to fulfill its national objectives. Essentially therefore, foreign policy can be defined as goals that a nation seek to attain abroad, the values that give rise to those objectives, the means and instruments used to pursue them. A state's foreign policy is determined by both domestic and external factors, which may change from time to time, thus forcing it to review its foreign policy to ensure that it operates in the best possible conditions to achieve those objectives. Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Middle East has been largely determined by the need to balance the domestic factors and the external demands of international politics.

In general, Malaysia has good and stable political relations with countries of the region, not only because of religious affinities and historical connections, but also because of the geographical distance between them, which reduce the possibility of political and strategic interferences, and entanglements. Malaysia's relations with the region have been fostered through bilateral and multilateral means. It has strong bilateral relations with major countries of the Middle East such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran. Malaysia is also a strong supporter of OIC and has established close rapports with its members. In recent years, the scope and content of Malaysia-Middle East relations have increased both at the official state-to-state level as well as at private sector level. This has become more visible since the event of September 11, 2001

An Overview of Malaysia's foreign policy

Essentially foreign policy can be defined as goals that a nation seeks to attain abroad, the values that give rise to those objectives, means and instruments used to pursue them. A state's foreign policy is determined by both domestic and external factors. These factors are by no means static, but can vary overtime, and as such may force a state to revamp its foreign policy accordingly to achieve its objectives. Since the days of the first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, Malaysia's foreign policy has consistently been premised on national interest, pragmatism and adherence to the principles enunciated in the Charter of the United Nations. (Mokhtar Selat 2006: 13) Malaysia's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dato' Seri

Syed Hamid Albar characterised Malaysia's foreign policy as "principled which rests on the values of humanity, justice and equality" and "recognises diversity and pluralism which makes up the mosaic of the nation and the international community." (Syed Hamid 2005: 30)

Malaysia's foreign policy has shifted from the staunchly pro-West position in the 1950s and 1960s to a policy of non-alignment in 1970 beginning with Tun Razak's administration. Since then Malaysia has continued with this foreign policy stance. The coming of Dr Mahathir Mohamad to power in 1981 brought a significant change in Malaysia's foreign policy. It is said that Dr Mahathir intended to keep foreign policy under his close control. (Khoo Boo Teik 1995: 74) He established an order of priority in foreign policy which provided Malaysian foreign policy executives an ordered sense of priorities, hitherto not formally established. In this 'concentric circles' of things, ASEAN was ranked first, followed by the Islamic countries in second position and thirdly by Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The Commonwealth, which used to be important for Malaysia, was downgraded to the fourth place followed by the rest of the world that did not fall into any of these categories. In reality however, it was difficult to strictly adhere to such order of priority. Dr Mahathir wanted to enhance Malaysia's role in international affairs through an assertive and active foreign policy, summed up as a foreign policy of "active internationalism. He has been successful in 'putting Malaysia on the world map'. This could be seen in the growing recognition accorded to Malaysia by several international organisations by the latter half of the 1980s. (Khoo Boo Teik 1995: 78)

However, Dr Mahathir was also very outspoken and "conducted his diplomacy with a heady mixture of high profile and plain speaking compared with the cautious foreign policies and the discreet ways of previous Malaysian administrations. He was seldom slow to castigate the powerful or to shame the hypocritical. He probed everywhere for 'double standards' and nailed them with a holier than thou zest'. (Khoo Boo Teik 1995: 79) He was critical of almost everybody—the West, the developing countries as well as his fellow Muslims, although he more often 'identified Malaysia with other developing countries.

Some contended, "Mahathir's diplomacy seemed destined to lose friends if not designed to gain enemies. (Khoo Boo Teik 1995:79) With regards to the Middle East, Dr Mahathir lamented that ' problems of the Middle East have become a web of power rivalries and intrigues among Muslim states to the extent that the central issue, that is the restoration to the Palestinian their homeland and an end to the desecration on our holy shrines in Al Quds have been sidestepped.' His critical views on the weaknesses of the Arab world did not endear him to the Arab governments, although he was definitely popular among Arab 'streets'.

Since the departure of Dr Mahathir from office, Malaysia has adopted for a 'quiet and soft diplomacy' rather than a combative approach. When he resigned in October 2003, his deputy Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was named Prime Minister. Under Abdullah, Malaysia's foreign policy posture became more measured, but without losing sight of Malaysia's national

interest. According to him, “a good foreign policy will make other countries comfortable in dealing with Malaysia. Malaysia’s foreign policy should not be a static doctrine...it must always be a dynamic instrument. However certain fundamentals will remain. Malaysia’s foreign policy will be pragmatic and principled all the time. (Mokhtar Selat 2006: 24). It is said that since Abdullah’s time, “ the role of foreign policy formulation has returned to Wismaputra (Foreign Ministry) and Malaysia has somewhat ceased to be seen as championing the interest of the Third World, and even if it did so they were they were done without being disagreeable” (Mokhtar Selat 2006 : 27) .

However, there was continuity during Abdullah. His top foreign policy priority was the East Asia Summit process (EAS), which would eventually lead to an East Asian Community. Abdullah also mended relations with Australia, which had been frosty during Mahathir’s time (Mokhtar Selat 2006: 25). When Abdullah stepped down in June 2009, the baton was handed over to Dato Seri Najib Tun Razak, son of second Prime Minister of Malaysia. Since his coming to power, Dato’ Seri Najib has visited many countries, including Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, China and France. If at all ‘country visits’ can be of indication as to the priorities of foreign policy, then Dato’Najib’s would be towards the East Asian region, especially ASEAN and China. So where does the Middle East stand in Malaysia’s foreign policy conception and priorities?

The Importance of Middle East

The region has one of the world’s largest populations, consisting of many countries, but is also politically divided. For the purpose of this paper, the Middle East is divided into three groups of countries. The first is the Arab world which is made up of 22 countries who are also members of the Arab League. Geographically, this would also include the North African countries of Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Sudan. The Arab world is described as a “heterogeneous agglomeration of some 350 million people –Maronites, Berbers, Copts, Kurds and Africans as well as Arabs and Muslims—inhabiting a miscellany of lands from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and from the Saharan desert to the foothills of Anatolia.” (The Economist 2009: 4) But it can also be said to have a commonality based on a common language, Arabic, and shared faith, Islam, even if some contend that these two elements provide only a loose identity of what the Arab World is all about. The second group of countries consist of non-Arab Muslim countries such as Iran and Turkey. The third is Israel, a state consisting of both Arabs and Jews, but whose existence in the heart of the Middle East has added to the political complexities of the region.

The Middle East is also a theatre in which the struggle for resources and global supremacy continues to be played out. The United States, Europe, China and Russia have been traditionally interested in the Middle East for political, economic and strategic reasons. The existence of huge energy resources has been one of the prime motives for these countries’ interest in the region. The Middle East and North Africa account for 60.4% of the world oil reserve (The Economist 2009: 5), hence the competition for the control of the region is hardly surprising. It is also strategically and politically crucial to the West, especially to the US because of the existence of Israel in the heart of the region. Countries such as Iran, Turkey

and Syria have also emerged as important geo - strategic players in the region. The designation of geo-strategic players are neither permanent nor fixed, therefore may increase the potential for regional political instability and rivalry. At times, some countries might have to be added or subtracted. Changes in the status of any of them would represent major events and involve some shifts in the distribution of power. Iraq for example, used to be an important geo-strategic player in the region, but it has been weakened and presently recovering from political instability in the aftermath of the dismissal of Saddam Hussein and US occupation in 2003.

The Middle East has a history of political instability and has witnessed many conflicts and bloody wars. It is argued that the causes of conflicts in the Arab world –the competition for energy, the conflict with Israel, the weaknesses of the Arab statehood and the stagnation of politics--- are taking on the characteristics of a chronic condition, and self-enforcing (The Economist 2009 : 15) . Wars and conflicts include those in Palestine, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan and sectarian conflicts in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon are symptomatic of the problem. Nearly a million have died in the past two decades of conflicts in various regions of the Arab world. They include the conflict in Darfur, Algerian civil war (1991-2002), the war in Iraq since 2003, Shiah rebellion in Iraq in 1991-1992, the Iraq-Kuwait war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Lebanon. They all have left deep political and social scars in the region and beyond, not to mention the adverse economic impact. Social discontent is on the rise and may turn into violence. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has also published a hard-hitting report on the state of the Arab world. Behind the political stagnation of the Arab world, a great deal of social upheaval is underway, with far reaching consequences. The old pattern of Arab government is described as “corrupt, opaque and authoritarian”. (The Economist 2009: 15).

There are those who subscribe to the theory that such governments will not be able to survive in the 21st century and are guessing when they would collapse. Such political change will have a profound effect on the economic, social and cultural environments of the region.

While waiting for such political upheaval to occur (if these predictions are correct), the Middle East, and the Arab world in particular, is changing. One of the most profound changes in the Arab world is its society. The population has doubled within 30 years from 180 million to 360 million by 2010. The majority of the Arab population is below 25 years of age. Rapid population growth puts pressure on the cities and increases competition for job opportunities. Cairo burgeoned from 9 million in 1976 to 18 million in 2006. So are other cities in the Arab world—Riyadh, Beirut and Amman. The economic and social statistics point to a bleak picture of Arab failure , based on a broad pattern of underperformance in investment, productivity, trade , education , social development and even culture(The Economist 2009 : 15) . Can the systems in these countries accommodate the demands of the youth for job and education; can the authorities counter and contain the restlessness of modern youth and the impact of global media and modern ideas? If these are not taken seriously, then the Arab world will have to confront the violence as an inevitable consequence of ignoring demands for change.

However, there are views that such a bleak picture needs to be treated with care. (The Economist 2009: 15). For millions of Arab population, there has been a lot of change and improvement. The Gulf States for example have trebled literacy levels to 75% since 1970, added 20 years of life expectancy and created an excellent infrastructure by spending a total of \$2 trillion. However, there are problems in providing jobs to a rapidly growing population. The main problem is creating well-balanced economies capable of providing enough work for the fast growing population. This is one of the biggest challenges as inability to do so will cause undesirable consequences for the peace and stability of the region. Anticipating these changes and their consequences will be extremely important for Malaysia to enable it to formulate a foreign policy towards the region which will be well suited to the new situation, and a policy that will be beneficial to Malaysia, politically, economically and socially.

The Evolution of Malaysia's relations with the Middle East

Despite the historical and social linkages between Malaysia and the Middle East, there is a lack of deeper understanding among the public about the region's geopolitical complexities as well as its socio-economic realities. The limited knowledge and apparent lack of interest among Malaysians are compounded by their perception of the region through 'religious' lenses. The Middle East is seen as synonymous with Islam, which remains an important factor that influencing the government and public over many issues concerning the region. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the past, religion has been the most important single factor in shaping Malaysia's relations with the countries of the Middle East. It was not until recently that other considerations such as economics came to be in the picture. Globalisation has also imposed an added pressure for Malaysia to re-look its foreign policy towards the region.

Early relations between Malaysia and the Middle East evolved around the religion of Islam which continued to shape their interactions throughout the centuries until the 20th century. It was through Islam that Malay society was exposed to the political and social developments in major Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Developments in these countries, especially in the early 20th century, influenced many Malay thinkers and the religious elite of the country. Egypt and Saudi Arabia have since a long time been favourite countries for Malays to study, mainly religious studies as early as the 17th and 18th centuries. The flow of students from Malaysia to Egypt and Saudi Arabia to do religious studies continues until today. In addition, interaction with Saudi Arabia has always been important because of the pilgrimage to Mecca by Muslims. The arrival of British colonial power in the 18th century gradually changed the focus of the Malay elite and intellectual class from the Middle East to the West. In the period after the end of the Second World War, it was the Western educated groups that dominated the administration and politics in Malaysia; they determined national policies, including foreign policy. However, one thing remains, Islam continues to play a role in shaping Malaysia's position on many international issues especially those related to the Muslim world of which the Middle East is a part, if not its core. There has been a conscious effort on the part of the Malaysian government to develop a strong consciousness of membership of a world-wide Islamic brotherhood. The Middle East,

because of its long established relations with Malaysia and the religious affinity, occupies an important position in Malaysia's conception of the Muslim world.

However, it was not until the 1960s that Malaysia began to pay attention to the countries of the Middle East. Prior to 1963, Kuala Lumpur's relations with the region were limited to major countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Observing the early years of Malaysia's foreign policy, Abdullah Ahmad argued that "It would appear that beyond Islam, the many Malay students studying at Al Azhar University in Cairo, the thousands of Muslim pilgrims going to Mecca annually and President Nasser's personal as well as Egypt's prominence in the non-aligned diplomacy and in the Arab world, the Middle East did not matter much in Malayan foreign policy considerations. (Abdullah Ahmad 1985: 112). However, the Indonesian *konfrantasi* was to have the most decisive impact on the formulation of Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Middle East when it was forced to compete vigorously against the well-entrenched Indonesia for the support of Muslims in Arab countries as well as in Asia and Africa. (Abdullah Ahmad 1985: 112)

It was during this time that Malaysia began to make serious efforts to strengthen its relations with the countries of the Middle East. Tun Abdul Razak, then Deputy Prime of Malaysia made visits to North African countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in 1964 to reduce the impact of isolation created by the Indonesian propaganda offensive following the launching of its 'confrontation' against Malaysia. In 1965, the Malaysian King visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and Egypt to further consolidate relations between Malaysia and the region. These efforts proved to be useful to Malaysia when the Afro-Asian Islamic Conference in Jakarta in 1965 rejected Indonesia's bid to condemn Malaysia as a product of British 'neo-colonialism'. Since then Malaysia continued to receive support and respect of Muslim countries, including those from the Middle East. In recognition of Malaysia's efforts to promote solidarity among Muslim countries, its first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj was nominated as the first Secretary –General of OIC after his retirement in 1970.

It was Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's 4th Prime Minister, who had profoundly affected the orientation of Malaysia's foreign policy towards the Middle East. He re-prioritised the country's foreign policy and positioned the Islamic world and OIC as second only after the ASEAN region. Middle East thus came under this ambit. Dr Mahathir made efforts to bring closer bilateral relations between Malaysia and the region. This was amply demonstrated by his visit accompanied by a high-level delegation to Libya, Egypt and Mali in December 1984. (Chandran 2007: 184) The results however demonstrated the pitfalls of a foreign policy that was badly conceived based on a perception and consideration that was flawed. The assumption that Islam would be a binding factor in our bilateral relations with many countries in the region cannot be taken for granted. According to Chandran, "not everything was smooth sailing when it came to interacting with foreign countries of which Malaysia had little prior knowledge or experience, and its somewhat bumbling attempt to provide technical and economic aid to Mali, for example, ended up as a complete diplomatic mess." (p 184)

The Palestine Issue

In 1981, Malaysia announced its decision to accord the PLO full diplomatic status. In 1989, the PLO diplomatic status was elevated further, equating Palestinian representation with that of any other resident diplomatic mission in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia also continued to be active in campaigning for support for Palestine at international for a *including* at OIC Summits. While this can be interpreted as a manifestation of the Islamic solidarity in its foreign policy, Malaysia's policy towards Palestine is also based on the principles of right of self-determination, justice and humanitarian values as mentioned above, which are also expressed in the foreign policies of many other countries. Malaysia's position on Palestine is well known. It supports international efforts for a just resolution of the conflict that will see the rights of Palestinians respected and restored. As for Israel, Malaysia can only consider recognition for the Jewish state if it restores the rights of Palestine. KL is supportive of any solution - one or two -state solution -as long as it guarantees the rights of Palestinians. Without a just settlement of the Palestinian issue, recognition of Israel will be thorny and will cause unwanted political backlash within Malaysia's domestic constituency.

Currently Malaysia, together with Brunei and Indonesia are the only ASEAN members who do not have diplomatic relations with Israel. Other countries such as Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines have established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state and maintained political, security, economic, cultural and functional cooperation with Israel. Singapore for example has had close defense cooperation while Thailand maintains close economic and functional cooperation with Israel. Attempts by some to raise the issue of whether or not KL should consider economic and social relations with Tel Aviv have been severely criticised by the public. At the moment, there are no compelling reasons or the urgency for Malaysia to revise its current 'wait and see' policy on Israel. As it had been often explained, any change in current policy depends on the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Managing bilateral relations: Issues and challenges

As mentioned earlier, during Dr Mahathir's administration, Malaysia made efforts to strengthen relations with the Middle East both through bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Response from these countries varied according to their own interests, social and historical familiarity with Malaysia. Some have been slow to develop the relationship, as in the case of Morocco. In an account of this lackluster interest, a Malaysian diplomat explained how he had to plod and make many requests for Rabat to establish a resident diplomatic mission in Kuala Lumpur, which would add further meaning and substance to the already existing cordial relations. (Mahayuddin 2006: 150) Malaysia established relations with Morocco in the early 60s when Indonesian confrontation against Malaysia forced the country to look for friends around the globe and Morocco was one of those countries that fitted the bill. While Malaysia has had an embassy in Morocco since that time, "Rabat showed little or no inclination at all to reciprocate it." (Mahayuddin 2006: 150)

It can be added that in the case of Morocco, several factors may contribute to the lack of interest on the part of Rabat to establish a resident mission. One is geography that distances the two countries. Besides, Morocco has been colonised by France and looked to Paris as its 'Mecca' while Malaysia looked to London. There is the difference in attitude and work ethics and sense of priorities in their foreign policies. However, today, there has been increase in social and educational relations with Morocco. The same could be said of relations with Algeria, which despite promising beginnings within NAM remains less visible in comparison to other traditional Arab friends of Malaysia such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The political instability in the Middle East also made relations unpredictable. This is evident in Malaysia's relations with Iraq, a country with high civilisation and history. Malaysia established relations with Iraq in the 1960s and the country became one of the more familiar polities to Malaysians. Many Malaysia students went to Iraq to study. However, the consolidation of Saddam Hussein in power and the regional ambition he had and power rivalry in the region made Malaysia-Iraqi relations more complicated than necessary. It was subjected to Iraq's relations with the West, particularly with the US as well its relations with the neighbours in Middle East. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in the war in August 1990, Malaysia voted in favour of the UN Resolution 678 calling for the withdrawal of Iraq from Kuwait territories. Malaysia had also issued a statement condemning the invasion and calling upon Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait.(Nadarajah 2006 : 248) Many at home criticised Malaysia's position as they were uneasy with Kuwaiti's alliance with the United States in this war. It must have also been quite uncomfortable for Kuala Lumpur to take that position, but as explained by the government, Malaysia's main argument was that it could not support an invasion of another country.

Malaysia was also aggressively promoting its 'economic diplomacy' around the globe and Middle East was one of the regions that Dr Mahathir had hoped would be advantageous for Malaysia in view of the long established connections and in the spirit of solidarity among OIC members. However, Iraq was facing a total embargo from the United Nations and this did not favour facilitation of such efforts. Malaysia and Iraq were negotiating for Iraq's purchase of Malaysia's palm oil which amounted to around 250,000 tons. (Nadarajah 2006: 249) The unpredictability of Iraqi internal situation, its lack of security certainly did not and does not help in consolidating Malaysia's economic interest in the country. However, events determining the fate of Iraq are beyond Malaysia's control. The Middle East is subject to great power rivalry and clearly being dominated by the West, especially the United States whose political, strategic and economic interests do not necessarily converge with that of Malaysia.

At times Malaysia has had to face the consequence of Arab states rivalry among them. This was the case when in June 2001, a Malaysian delegation on its way to Iraq was not given the clearance by Saudi and Baharani air controllers to fly to Baghdad. It was after a clear message and insistence given by Malaysia's foreign Ministry that bilateral relations between Malaysia and these two countries would be affected if clearance could not be obtained that the Malaysian plane was allowed to proceed to Baghdad.(Ahmad Fuzi 2006 : 193) Other events

in the region can also affect Malaysia's diplomacy in the region. In 1986, when the situation in Libya became unpredictable due to its tense relations with the United States, and for security reasons, Malaysia took precaution to delay the sending of its ambassador to Tripoli, even if the Malaysian mission there was without ambassador for eight years prior to that. (Hasmy Agam 2006: 227)

However, it must be said that despite not having the influence (or the desire) to control events in the Middle East, Malaysia has some advantages in managing its affairs with the countries of the region. Not least, this is because Malaysia is a respected Muslim country among the Islamic world, one that Dr Mahathir has successfully 'put on the world map'. It has managed to 'navigate' the unpredictable waters of regional politics of the Middle East in a way not to endanger its relations with these countries and those traditional friends of Malaysia in the West. Bilateral relations are affected by the power rivalry as well as the conception of a country's national interest. The case of Turkey may be one in point. Historically, there has been close links between Malaysia and Turkey during the early 20th century when political events and social developments in Turkey had impact on Malay society. But Turkey evolved to place its national interest more within the 'European' context rather than that of a Muslim or Middle Eastern country. Turkey, it seems regards itself as a European rather than an Islamic country. Moreover, it has maintained close relations with Israel right from the beginning, and these relations have acquired a military dimension in the more recent past (Amin 2002: 130). As such, despite the goodwill and intention, Malaysia-Turkish relations may suffer from some limitations politically and economically, although these factors need not be a hindrance in enhancing relations in areas that can be mutually beneficial.

Critical choices and options

As a small country and geographically not near the Middle East, Malaysia is limited in its ability to affect or influence the course of events and decisions concerning the region. As such and due to the limited resources, it has to make choices and options in defining and implementing its Middle East foreign policy. While the 'Islamic factor' remains as a part of the consideration, Malaysia's foreign policy is increasingly conceived to secure its national interest as defined by the need and wishes of the state at a given period. Some of the pertinent issues to be considered are the Israel- Palestine issue, Malaysia's role in OIC, economic potential and opportunities to be found in the region, enhancing social and cultural ties and the continuity of good political relations. If these are Malaysia's interests in the region, the question that arises is how to obtain them in the best possible conditions so that its limited resources are not wasted or thinly stretched. Malaysia will also have to compete with other countries that are in a more advantageous position to do so. Can Malaysia secure its national interest in the region by continuing its old policy? Alternatively, in view of the changes that have taken place within the region, does it need a paradigm change in its foreign policy towards the Middle East?

One of Malaysia's foreign policy priorities, as it has been in the past, is to cultivate and maintain good political relations with countries of the Middle East for various reasons. In order to maximise gains from the existing cordial political relations Malaysia needs to

establish priorities concerning bilateral relations. These priorities can be defined by the political, strategic, economic or social importance of these countries to Malaysia. It is understood that for Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, for a host of reasons remains a top priority. Saudi Arabia has always been important and will remain so because of its position and influence in the Islamic world, being the custodian of the Holy Places in Islam. For Malaysia, keeping good relations with Saudi Arabia is essential as it can facilitate or hinder the aspirations of thousands of Malaysians who each year hope to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Apart from Saudi Arabia, several others have emerged as politically, economically and strategically important actors in the Middle East. Iran for examples possesses vast natural resources—oil-- and commands a political presence in the region and invariably be seen as a potential threat by some .Other countries such as Libya and Syria are becoming important geo-strategic players that can affect the stability of the region. However, these are also countries with a history of controversial relations with the West, a factor that may influence Malaysia's dealings with them. Currently Malaysia is quietly following a policy of "filling in the gap" in its economic relations following their strained relations with the West. Even if current situation in Iraq is uncertain, it is an important country in the region and cannot be ignored.

Maintaining good political relations with these countries is necessary to further develop economic ties. Any domestic political change will have an impact on the bilateral relations, especially in pursuing the above-mentioned policy. Libya and Syria are currently warming up their relations with the West, although the kind of impact such policy might have on Malaysia's interests is still unknown. Currently Iran is embroiled with the West on the nuclear issue and Malaysia has carefully navigated its policy not to lose the confidence of both sides. While Egypt is politically an important actor in the Middle East -- in fact can be considered as a regional power, its importance for Malaysia should not be overestimated. Notwithstanding the presence of a large number of Malaysian students in the country, and despite the fact that Egypt is an important country in the Middle Eastern chessboard, it has less to offer for Malaysia in comparison with the other major countries mentioned. Part of the explanation is to be found in Egypt's political and economic dependence on the West that reduces the political and economic need of each other. If it were not for the presence of a large number of Malaysian students in the country, the importance of Egypt for Malaysia would be further reduced.

Forging relationship: The Multilateral Initiatives

Besides bilateral relations, Malaysia's relations with the Middle East can also be expanded through multilateral organisations. In re-prioritising his foreign policy after coming to power in 1981, Dr Mahathir wanted to maintain close relations with the Muslim world, if not bring that relationship to a higher level. As such has accorded the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) a high priority in Malaysia's foreign policy. His efforts were rewarded when in October 2003, Malaysia was given the Chairmanship of OIC, at the same time when it became the Chairman of NAM. As chairman of OIC, it had the responsibility of monitoring

the two main issues before the organisation—namely the US-led War in Iraq and the search for a Middle East peace plan. An OIC meeting was held in Malaysia on 22nd April 2004 specifically to express its members' disenchantment with George Bush for having openly sided with Israel's so-called new proposal for a settlement, which Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi denounced in no uncertain terms. (Chandran 2007: 321)

Malaysia inspired the creation of the capacity-building program for OIC member countries aimed to help member countries, particularly the least developed members to enhance and strengthened their capacities to accelerate economic development. Within the OIC context, Malaysia took the initiatives of promoting a people-based global campaign involving civil society, in support of Palestine. Prime Minister Abdullah was also determined to push through a program of capacity building among its members and by March 2005, three countries, Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Bangladesh had been identified for specific projects in the old palm industry, oil and mineral resources exploitation and fisheries respectively. (Chandran 2007 : 322). Malaysia has some standing within the Islamic world as an important contributor to the OIC- especially in terms of initiatives, solidarity and coordination. It therefore would be in a position to manage its interest within the organisation, even if this means 'choosing 'the kind of activities it wants to actively engage within the ambit of the Organisation. Although the OIC is not a vehicle created particularly to deal with the Middle East, and its 'returns' for Malaysia is not particularly impressive, it could used to further strengthen interactions between Malaysia and the countries of the Middle East, as many members of OIC are Muslim countries of the region. Turkey is particularly important for Malaysia in this regard, as Ankara has taken many social and economic initiatives, including the D-8 of which Malaysia is a part.

Strengthening economic relations

Another crucial issue is expanding economic relations between Malaysia and the region. During Dr Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister, efforts were made in promoting greater economic cooperation and trade relations among the Muslim countries. "Like the early Muslims who were great traders, Malaysia believes in free trade...we established an Islamic financial system to enable Muslims to enjoy the benefits of modern financial system". (Mahathir Mohamad 2000: 52). He had hoped that the rich nations of the Middle East would be willing to work within bilateral and multilateral frameworks for the economic betterment of the Islamic *ummah* as a whole. However, he was known to be disappointed with the lack of progress in this area. "The Islamic world today is full of paradoxes and contradictions. Despite being resource rich, we are economically poor and weak." (Mahathir Mohamad 2000: 51).

Although those policy initiatives did not produce the results as Dr Mahathir had envisaged, both at the levels of the *ummah* and bilateral relations, they have succeeded in creating an awareness of the economic potential and opportunity in the region. It is also true that it did not translate into a particular foreign policy agenda such as the Look East Policy. However, in the end Dr Mahathir's efforts and vision helped to reduce the level of ignorance about each other and generated interests in an area previously unfamiliar to the public and

policy makers. It is not an exaggeration to say that the policy initiatives of Dr Mahathir regarding closer economic and trade relations among the Muslim countries have been significant in paving the way for current expanding relations with the Middle East. In this era of globalisation, relations between Malaysia and the Middle East can no longer be confined to the traditional links that characterised earlier relations. The principle of “economics as the bread and butter of Malaysia’s diplomacy “ fondly echoed by Malaysian foreign policy makers of the 1990s remains a valid statement, although it should not be the sole objective of Malaysia’s relations with countries of the Middle East.

Expanding Social relations

While it may be a tough battle for Malaysia to compete with the more established nations of the West in trade and economic spheres, Malaysia’s position as a Muslim country with close socio-cultural affinities to the region may be utilised to enhance cooperation in social and educational areas. The wisdom of such policy has in fact been proven, as there are now greater interactions between Malaysia and the region in areas such as tourism and education. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of students from the Middle East studying in Malaysia, with current estimate of more than 6,000. Yemen alone accounted for approximately 3,400 in 2008 as compared to 40 students in 2000. The number might be small if compared to the number of Malaysian students in the Middle East, where in Egypt alone there are about 6,000. However, the increase in the number of Yemeni students is significant if we consider that Yemen is not a ‘traditional partner’ in education for Malaysia. On the other hand, this surge is not surprising considering that social relations have existed since a long time between the two peoples. The Yemeni case is an example of how long established social ties can facilitate cooperation in other areas.

Tourism is another area of potential gain and cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. The result of the increase in Middle Eastern tourists’ arrival in Malaysia is visible especially in the capital city where there are many areas being designed as ‘Middle Eastern’ in character. The increase in tourists and students from the Middle East to Malaysia has been significant especially since the event of September 11 2001 which created awareness among many Middle Eastern countries that Malaysia could provide a more conducive and safer environment for social, educational and business exchanges.

Conclusion

There is the perception and belief that current policy towards the Middle East is on the right track and therefore there is no hurry for a change. Political relations are good with all the countries in the region and there is no critical issue that may disrupt this relationship. Domestically too, there is no pressure from Malaysia’s domestic constituencies to revise or alter the existing foreign policy towards the Middle East. While Malaysia does not have the intention or the capacity to influence affairs of that region, it still has some influence in affecting the good will of these countries either bilaterally or within the OIC. This can be made use to project Malaysia’s economic and social relations in the way that it will not be

marginalised or left out of any opportunities that the region can offer. Malaysia's role in the OIC can also be redefined to suit its national interest. It has actively participated and strongly supported multilateralism and multilateral cooperation through OIC without reservation. But can such policy accommodate Malaysia's interests?

Malaysia has certainly an advantage in its interactions with many of the countries of the Middle East due to the religious affinity and the long established cultural and social linkages with the region. However, the scope of future relationship should go beyond these traditional linkages to expand into the economic sphere. As it has been pointed out, Malaysia is a trading nation, therefore must consider economic and trade opportunities on its foreign policy agenda in the region. While it is difficult to penetrate in the area and compete with other countries that had long established a foothold in the region, abandoning it will be tantamount to ignoring an opportunity when it comes knocking. In view of the fact that foreign policy should safeguard a nation's interest, it is crucial for Malaysia to develop a foreign policy that places its own national interest above all others. Malaysia has no choice but to re-organise its agenda and priorities with regard to bilateral and multilateral relations involving the region to optimize the gains as well as to ensure that its limited resources are not wasted. The two perspectives, one at the level of the solidarity of the *ummah*, and the other at the level of national interest, should not be at odds with each other, but complementary.

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About the Author

RUHANAS HARUN is an associate professor and currently Head of Strategic Studies and International Relations Programme, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). She is also an associate senior fellow at the Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB), UKM. She specializes on Malaysia's foreign policy and national security. Her current research interests also include political and social changes in Southeast Asia, conflicts and peace-building process in the Muslim world. She can be contacted at ruhanas_harun2003@yahoo.com.